

We claim:

1. A system for facilitating access to descriptions of multimedia items from a plurality of content providers of said items, wherein information required by said descriptions is stored in corresponding metadata collections associated with said multimedia items, said system comprising:

(a) a metadata server associated with each said content provider and operable as a description-generating process for communicating with one or more description-receiving processes, each said metadata server being configured, for each said content provider, to perform the steps of:

(i) receiving a request for said descriptions from one of said description-receiving processes in a predetermined request format;

(ii) interpreting said received request according to said predetermined request format;

(iii) accessing said information about said multimedia items in said metadata collection of said content provider in response to said interpreted request;

(iv) formatting said accessed information as a description according to a predetermined scheme, said resulting description containing at least one link which represents a return request to said metadata server;

(v) sending said formatted description to the said description-receiving process; and

(b) at least one said description-receiving process accessible to and operable by potential customers of said content providers and providing said potential customers with a single user interface to access descriptions of multimedia items generated from said multiple metadata servers.

2. A system according to claim 1 wherein each said metadata collection is stored in a corresponding database.

3. A system according to claim 1 wherein each said metadata collection is stored in structured or semi-structured files.

4. A system according to claim 1 wherein said metadata server is identified by a uniform resource identifier.

5. A system according to claim 4 wherein said request to said metadata server is included in said uniform resource identifier identifying said metadata server.

6. A system according to claim 1 wherein said descriptions are in XML.

7. A system according to claim 1 wherein said predetermined scheme specifies the structure and syntax of said description.

8. A system according to claim 1 wherein said predetermined scheme is represented using the XML Schema language.

9. A system according to claim 1 wherein said link has a defined source and target.

10. A system according to claim 9 wherein said link source is an element containing the identity of said link target.

11. A system according to claim 10 wherein said link target is represented using a uniform resource locator.

12. A system according to claim 11 wherein said link target identifies the same metadata server that generated said link.

13. A system according to claim 1 further comprising a transaction module associated with an administrator of a corresponding said description-receiving process, said transaction module being configured to monitor a number of said requests made to any one said metadata server and to invoice the corresponding said content provider on behalf of said administrator for said number of requests.

14. A system according to claim 13 wherein said transaction module forms part of said one metadata server and said invoicing is automatically performed by the said metadata server.

5 15. A system according to claim 14 wherein the said automatic invoicing is enabled by storing a charge identification code for said corresponding content provider in said corresponding metadata server.

10 16. A system according to claim 15 wherein the charge identification code for said corresponding content provider is automatically accessible by said corresponding metadata server.

15 17. A system according to claim 1 wherein users of said description-receiving processes are presented with an option of following a provided link to a description-generating process, said provided link comprising an advertisement for said user.

20 18. A system according to claim 1 wherein each said metadata server is constructed from a common customisable module, each said module being customised for association with one said content provider by an interpreter arranged to translate requests received in said predetermined request format from any said description-receiving process into descriptions of said corresponding metadata items of said content provider and to translate said accessed information into said description-format for return to said description-receiving process.

25 19. A system for providing a plurality of users access to multimedia items associated with a plurality of content providers, each said content provider having a legacy database in which descriptions of corresponding said items are stored, a content database in which said corresponding multimedia items are stored, and a database manager for controlling access to said descriptions and corresponding multimedia items from said respective
30 databases, said system comprising:

a media browser application accessible to each of said users and configured to generate user requests for descriptions of said multimedia items, said requests being generated in a predetermined request format;

5 a metadata server application associated with each said content provider and configured to translate each said user request received by said metadata server from said predetermined request format into a specific format of said database manager to thereby provide for said database manager to query said legacy database and return at least one response description to said metadata server, said metadata server translating said at least one response description into said predetermined description format and returning the
10 translated description to the requesting said media browser for presentation to said user.

20. A system according to claim 19 further comprising a request transaction module associated with an administrator of said media browser, said request transaction module being configured to monitor a number of said requests made to any one said metadata
15 server and to invoice the corresponding said content provider on behalf of said administrator for said number of requests.

21. A system according to claim 19 wherein said media browser comprises a user interface configured for presenting said translated description to said user, said system
20 further comprising a user transaction module by which said user may access, for consideration provided to said content provider, at least one said multimedia item from said presented description.

22. A system according to claim 19 wherein said descriptions are in XML.
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23. A system according to claim 21 wherein said user interface comprises a multimedia user interface arranged to reproduce at least part of said multimedia item from said returned description.

30 24. A system according to claim 21 wherein said item comprises an image and said part comprises one of a thumbnail or low-resolution representation of said image.

25. A system for facilitating access to structured information from a plurality of heterogeneous information sources, said system comprising:

(a) an information server associated with each said information source and operable as a structured information generating process for communicating with one or more structured information receiving processes, each information server being configured to perform, for an information source, the steps of:

(i) receiving a request for said structured information from one of said structured information receiving processes in a predetermined request format;

(ii) interpreting said received request according to said predetermined request format;

(iii) accessing information in said associated information source in response to said interpreted request;

(iv) formatting said accessed information as said structured information according to a predetermined scheme, said resulting structured information containing at least one link which represents a return request to said information server;

(v) sending said structured information to said structured information receiving process; and

(b) at least one structured information receiving process accessible to and operable by potential users of said information sources with a single user interface to access and interpret said structured information from said multiple information servers.

26. A system according to claim 25 wherein said information source is a database.

27. A system according to claim 25 wherein said information source is a collection of structured or semi-structured information files.

28. A system according to claim 25 wherein said information server is identified by a uniform resource identifier.

29. A system according to claim 28 wherein said request to said information server is included in the uniform resource identifier identifying the said information server.

30. A system according to claim 25 wherein said structured information is in XML.

31. A system according to claim 25 wherein said predetermined scheme specifies the structure and syntax of the said structured information to be generated.

32. A system according to claim 25 wherein said predetermined scheme is represented using the XML Schema language.

33. A system according to claim 25 wherein said link has a defined source and target.

34. A system according to claim 33 wherein said link source is an element containing the identity of said link target.

35. A system according to claim 34 wherein said link target is represented using a uniform resource locator.

36. A system according to claim 35 wherein said link target identifies the same information server that generated the said link.

37. A metadata server operable as a description-generating process for communicating with one or more description-receiving processes, said metadata server being configured to perform the steps of:

(i) receiving a request for descriptions of multimedia items from one of said description-receiving processes in a predetermined request format, wherein information required by said descriptions is stored in corresponding metadata collections associated with said multimedia items;

(ii) interpreting said received request according to said predetermined request format;

- (iii) accessing said information about said multimedia items in said metadata collection of said content provider in response to said interpreted request;
- (iv) formatting said accessed information as a description according to a predetermined scheme, said resulting description containing at least one link which represents a return request to said metadata server; and
- (v) sending said formatted description to the said description-receiving process.

38. A metadata server according to claim 37 wherein each said metadata collection is stored in a corresponding database.

39. A metadata server according to claim 37 wherein each said metadata collection is stored in structured or semi-structured files.

40. A metadata server according to claim 37 wherein said metadata server is identified by a uniform resource identifier.

41. A metadata server according to claim 40 wherein said request to said metadata server is included in said uniform resource identifier identifying said information server.

42. A metadata server according to claim 37 wherein said descriptions are in XML.

43. A metadata server according to claim 37 wherein said predetermined scheme specifies the structure and syntax of said description.

44. A metadata server according to claim 37 wherein said predetermined scheme is represented using the XML Schema language.

45. A metadata server according to claim 37 wherein said link has a defined source and target.

46. A metadata server according to claim 45 wherein said link source is an element containing the identity of said link target.

47. A metadata server according to claim 46 wherein said link target is represented using a uniform resource locator.

48. A metadata server according to claim 47 wherein said link target identifies the same metadata server that generated the said link.

49. An information server operable as a structured information generating process for communicating with one or more structured information receiving processes, said information server being configured to perform the steps of:

- (i) receiving a request for said structured information from one of said structured information receiving processes in a predetermined request format;
- (ii) interpreting said received request according to said predetermined request format;
- (iii) accessing information in response to said interpreted request;
- (iv) formatting said accessed information as said structured information according to a predetermined scheme, said resulting structured information containing at least one link which represents a return request to said information server; and
- (v) sending said structured information to said structured information receiving process.

50. An information server according to claim 49 wherein said information source is a database.

51. An information server according to claim 49 wherein said information source is a collection of structured or semi-structured information files.

52. An information server according to claim 49 wherein said information server is identified by a uniform resource identifier.

53. An information server according to claim 52 wherein said request to said information server is included in the uniform resource identifier identifying the said information server.

54. An information server according to claim 49 wherein said structured information is in XML.

55. An information server according to claim 49 wherein said predetermined scheme specifies the structure and syntax of the said structured information to be generated.

56. An information server according to claim 49 wherein said predetermined scheme is represented using the XML Schema language.

57. An information server according to claim 49 wherein said link has a defined source and target.

58. An information server according to claim 57 wherein said link source is an element containing the identity of said link target.

59. An information server according to claim 58 wherein said link target is represented using a uniform resource locator.

60. An information server according to claim 59 wherein said link target identifies the same information server that generated the said link.

61. A computer readable medium, having a program recorded thereon, where the program is configured to make a metadata server operable as a description-generating process for communicating with one or more description-receiving processes, said program comprising:

code for receiving a request for descriptions of multimedia items from one of said description-receiving processes in a predetermined request format, wherein information required by said descriptions is stored in corresponding metadata collections associated with said multimedia items;

code for interpreting said received request according to said predetermined request format;

code for accessing said information about said multimedia items in said metadata collection of said content provider in response to said interpreted request;

code for formatting said accessed information as a description according to a predetermined scheme, said resulting description containing at least one link which represents a return request to said metadata server; and

code for sending said formatted description to the said description-receiving process.

62. A computer readable medium, having a program recorded thereon, where the program is configured to make an information server operable as a structured information generating process for communicating with one or more structured information receiving processes, said program comprising:

code for receiving a request for said structured information from one of said structured information receiving processes in a predetermined request format;

code for interpreting said received request according to said predetermined request format;

code for accessing information in response to said interpreted request;

code for formatting said accessed information as said structured information according to a predetermined scheme, said resulting structured information containing at least one link which represents a return request to said information server; and

code for sending said structured information to said structured information receiving process.